

# CREATING SMART GOALS\*

SMART is an acronym that you can use both when setting goals independently and discussing goals with your mentor. As a framework, it is meant to help make abstract goals more concrete through realistic planning and reflection. It stands for:

## Specific | Measurable | Achievable | Relevant | Timely

SMART goals include all 5 of these aspects, explained in more detail below.

### Specific

Having specific goals will help you stay focused and motivated as you move forward. When thinking about your goals, ask yourself the following questions:

1. What do I want to achieve?
2. Why is this goal important to me?
3. What resources do I need?

**Mentoring example:** Amna is a third year undergraduate student who wants to get more involved in research before she leaves university. She goes to her lab mentor, Dr. Rodriguez, and asks for help in achieving this goal. After listening to Amna speak, and asking questions, Dr. Rodriguez suggests that she look into completing an undergraduate honors thesis as a way of accomplishing this goal.

**Tip:** Breaking down your goals into unambiguous sub-goals can help you in centering specificity, as well as creating timelines for completion. Think of your goal like the recipe for a cake; you need to start with the ingredients before enjoying a slice.

**Mentoring example:** By their next meeting, Amna has researched the undergraduate honors thesis requirements and decided she wants to pursue this goal. Together, she and Dr. Rodriguez further break down the steps required to start, work on, and finish a thesis. By the end of the meeting, Amna has a concrete idea of where to start and what she needs to complete before her next mentoring check-in.

### Measurable

Having measurable goals will help you and your mentor track your progress, meet important deadlines, and feel the satisfaction that comes from getting closer to accomplishment. When thinking about your goals, ask yourself the following questions:

1. What are my indicators of progress?
2. How will I quantify my progress?
3. How will I know when the goal has been achieved?

**Tip:** Keeping track of your progress in a log, digital document, or journal can help you feel like you are making consistent steps towards your accomplishment. Find a system which works for you and stick with it -- you'll be glad to look back on everything you did when you reach your goal.

**Mentoring example:** Makeda is a second-year graduate student who would like to get better at balancing her studies with other life commitments (self-care, community, work, etc.). She goes to her mentor, Dr. Hope, and asks for advice on integrating non-school responsibilities into her schedule. Makeda decides to quantify her progress by tracking how many days a week she is able to dedicate at least three hours towards non-academic duties. She will know when her goal is achieved when she is able to do this at least five days a week.

### Achievable

Almost any goal is achievable when you plan actions wisely, remain accountable, and have support in your process. As you grow and develop, previously far-away goals will become more attainable as you learn. SMART goals will stretch your abilities while building on previously established skills. When thinking about your goals, ask yourself the following questions:

1. What specific actions can I take to achieve this goal?
2. Is there a particular order or timeline these actions need to have?
3. Are there any other tools/skills/resources I need to accomplish this goal?

**Tip:** Remember, your goals should be challenging, but not impossible. If you're having difficulty making progress, it's okay to take a step back, reflect, and readjust. In giving yourself more time to grow, you can avoid burnout and frustration.

**Mentoring example:** Lee is a new hire in the university's marketing department and they would like to earn a promotion within a year. To accomplish this goal, they ask Natalia, their peer and a more experienced marketer within the department, for guidance. Natalia helps Lee in finding a professional course which expands their design skills; she also practices business negotiation and networking techniques with Lee. Within their specific time frame, Lee has taken concrete actions to professionally improve and is ready to be considered for promotion.

## Relevant

It's important to think about how your goals fit into your long-term objectives, as well as how they fit together towards your future. Making sure your goals are relevant ensures that you don't waste time on projects that don't serve you in a meaningful way. When thinking about your goals, ask yourself the following questions:

1. Is this goal future-oriented?
2. Is this the right time for me to pursue this goal?
3. Will achieving this goal aid me on the path towards my desired future?

**Tip:** Your goals don't always have to mesh together perfectly, but they shouldn't directly contradict each other. By creating more harmony between your goals, you'll be able to better invest your time, energy, and efforts.

**Mentoring example:** Malik, a first-year undergraduate student, wants to volunteer more with Club For Change, an organization on campus. He sets up a series of meetings with Sarai, the organization's president, to discuss this goal. Throughout their conversations, Malik and Sarai talk about his other responsibilities around campus, including work-study, other clubs, and classes. Together, they conclude that it may be better for Malik to get more involved with Club For Change the following semester after his other commitments have eased.

## Timely

Every goal needs a deadline to help you stay on track and remain motivated. Moving your mindset from "someday" to "today" will help you work towards your goal. When thinking about your goals, ask yourself the following questions:

1. When would I like this goal to be accomplished by?
2. How long is this project likely to take me?
3. When am I going to work towards this goal?

**Tip:** Set mini-deadlines for yourself to make sure you are hitting important milestones, especially if your timeline is relatively long. These will help boost accountability and maintain a sense of urgency.

**Mentoring example:** Shane is a third-year undergraduate applying for a prestigious study abroad fellowship which has a national deadline. Several months before the submission is due, he works with his mentor, Dr. Rosenberg, to go over the application requirements, revise drafts, brainstorm interview topics, and more. Shane sets aside specific days each week to tweak his essays and check-in with Dr. Rosenberg about his progress. Due to his planning, and the support of his mentor, he is able to submit his application early.

**Remember:** Goal-setting is a dynamic process and your goals will change over time. Evaluate and review your goals at regular intervals, both independently and with your mentor, to make sure they are continuing to serve you.

	Questions to Ask Myself	Reflection Answers
<b>Specific</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What do I want to achieve?</li> <li>2. Why is this goal important to me?</li> <li>3. What resources do I need?</li> </ol>	
<b>Measurable</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What are my indicators of progress?</li> <li>2. How will I quantify my progress?</li> <li>3. How will I know when the goal has been achieved?</li> </ol>	
<b>Achievable</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What specific actions can I take to achieve this goal?</li> <li>2. Is there a particular order or timeline these actions need to have?</li> <li>3. Are there any other tools/skills/resources I need to accomplish this goal?</li> </ol>	
<b>Relevant</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Is this goal future-oriented?</li> <li>2. Is this the right time for me to pursue this goal?</li> <li>3. Will achieving this goal aid me on the path towards my desired future?</li> </ol>	
<b>Timely</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. When would I like this goal to be accomplished by?</li> <li>2. How long is this project likely to take me?</li> <li>3. When am I going to work towards this goal?</li> </ol>	

→ MENTOR.UIOWA.EDU

\* Adapted from [MindTools](#) and [The Center For Mentoring](#)